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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a study of sex typing in children. A total of 213 preschool and elementary school children were asked to classify each of 20 words as a boy's word, girl's word, or either a boy's or girl's word. Words consistently classified by children as boys' words included "fighting," "hammer," and "blue." Words consistently classified by children as girls' words included "doll," "washing machine," and "crying." Words which were classified as equally boys' or girls' words included "swimming," "chair," and "pencil." Girls were less stereotypical in their responses than were boys. Elementary school boys were more stereotypical in their responses than were preschool boys. More consistent answers were given by elementary school students than by preschoolers, and by boys than by girls. A 12-item reference list is provided. A copy of the form used by the experimenters to record the children's responses is appended. (BC)

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A STUDY OF GENDER PERCEPTIONS OF YOUNG
CHILDREN USING LANGUAGE CLASSIFICATIONS

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I AM THE CHILD

I am the child.
All the world waits for my coming.
All the earth watches with interest to see
 what I shall become.
Civilization hangs in the balance,
For what I am, the world of tomorrow will be.

I am the child.
I have come into your world, about which
I know nothing.
Why I came I know not;
How I came I know not.
I am curious; I am interested.

I am the child.
You hold in your hand my destiny
You determine, largely, whether I shall
 succeed or fail.
Train me, I pray you, that I may be a
 blessing to the world.

-from "Child's Appeal,"
Mamie Gene Cole

A STUDY OF GENDER PERCEPTIONS OF YOUNG
CHILDREN USING LANGUAGE CLASSIFICATIONS

A few weeks ago my 6 1/2 year-old daughter, Nicole, was talking about one of her stuffed animals. She described it as a "he." The animal has no genitals and no clothes. I asked her why she had called it a "he". She said that she liked "he's" better than "she's" and "anyway there are more "he's" than "she's". (Sheldon, 1990).

A stereotype is a standardized mental picture based on a common characteristic of a group of people. It represents an oversimplified opinion or an uncritical judgement and is not reality-based. Sex role stereotypes are stereotypes based on roles assigned to persons because of their sex.

In developing sex roles, children learn to prefer behaviors and activities that are accepted as appropriate for their own sex. The learning of such preferences is called sex typing. If children believe that some behavior is not appropriate for their sex, they are likely to feel some anxiety about engaging in it and may try to avoid this behavior when ever possible.

The sex typing of particular activities and behaviors differ as a function of culture, social class, and ethnic groups. For example, in the school setting of the United States, boys are called on more than girls (Wright, 1991). Boys get positive feedback for academic achievement, while

girls get positive feedback for being neat, quiet, and having good handwriting. Boys receive negative reinforcement for behavior, while girls receive negative reinforcement for academics. For example, if a girl does not know the answer, the teacher is likely to move on to another student. On the other hand, if a boy does not know the answer, the teacher will more than likely work with the child until the right answer is given (Brodkin, 1991).

There is also an under representation of women and girls in books. When women are shown in books, it is often in a passive role like taking notes opposed to an active role like being a chemist or instructor (Wright, 1991). The English language reflects sexist, male-centered attitudes. It sets male experiences up as the norm. "He" is used more than "she" in English writing and language (Sheldon, 1990). In the past few years many persons, particularly women active in women's liberation groups, have increasingly condemned sex typing in young children. These women argue that current sex-typing practices often effectively discourage girls from considering many career opportunities (Wright, 1990).

The purpose of this paper is to report an investigation of sex typing in children. Children, age three thru thirteen, were asked to classify selected words as either masculine or feminine. The results shared in this paper will enable parents and teachers to encourage more egalitarian relationships and behavior in children.

RESEARCH

Many theories have been developed to highlight the acquisition of sex roles. Some theorists argue that children learn sex roles from modeling the same-sexed parent or care-giver and from being rewarded for appropriate sex-typed behavior. Others claim that children learn sex roles through a cognitive process of deciding what behaviors girls engage in and what behaviors boys engage in (O'Reilly, 1988).

Many parents today work hard to bring up their sons and daughters "equally", believing that an egalitarian (identical as possible) upbringing is the best way to equip both genders for adult life. However, this is not true of all parents. Stereotyping by sex is still a burden carried from past traditions. Individuals do a great injustice if they follow old stereotypes such as boys don't cry and girls should be weak. Many parents and even teachers are extremely stereotypical when dealing with boys and girls. This stereotyping can be harmful both socially and academically for children. Clearly, with new knowledge and new recognition of equality, it is time to outgrow irrational stereotypes that keep the world from being a more productive and happier place (Block, 1978).

There are many studies that demonstrate that infant boys and girls are treated differently. Girls are held more and spoken to more frequently than are infant boys. Boys are expected to be independent earlier than girls, and boys are

treated more roughly than girls, including being punished more often (Lewis, 1972). In a 1991 study Fagot and Hagan found that parents begin to show sex-determined responses when children are about 18 months old. Parents thus begin to perceive the necessity for teaching appropriate behaviors as the child begins to enter the larger world (Block, 1978).

Stereotypes are taught and maintained by the socializing processes that are experienced in the family, the church, the school, and the community. In too many American families, boys are not as prepared to be fathers as girls are prepared to be mothers. Boys are often denied the nurturing experience that comes from playing with dolls; they grow into adults who are unfamiliar with how to nurture their own children (Lewis, 1972). Some socialization differences confirmed previous findings that parents begin to show sex-determined responses when children are about 18 months old (Fagot and Hagan, 1991). These authors state that perhaps the most surprising finding was that parents respond more negatively to boys' attempts to communicate and more positively to girls. This can only lead individuals to believe that early childhood experiences socialize children into their gender roles. For example, girls tend to be verbal and expressive while boys tend to be non-verbal and aggressive (Fagot and Hagan, 1991). A boy will get praised more for playing with blocks, than for playing with dolls. Parents generally support physically activity in boys more than in girls, both by praising it and

by participating in it (Seifert and Hoffnung, 1991). The adage "pink is for girls, blue is for boys" describes a highly visible and pervasive aspect of American culture. Young children share prevailing societal stereotypes linking colors and sex, and that clothing color influences perceptions and impressions of others (Picariello, Greenberg, Pillemer, 1990).

Lytton and Romney (cited in Fagot and Hagan, 1991) found in general, if boys and girls were treated differently, they were treated so by both parents. If mothers and fathers reacted differently, this difference in reaction was directed at both boys and girls. In addition, fathers gave boys more positive reinforcement for male-typical toys, and mothers gave more instructions when the child was attempting to communicate. This occurred when the children were 18 months of age, exactly at the time that sex-role differentiation is beginning. Fagot, Hagan, Leinbach, and Kronsberg (1985) found that adults in general paid more attention to boy's negative behaviors. Girls' negative behaviors were more likely to be ignored, which for the young child is a type of extinction paradigm. In both studies, younger children received more, not less, sex-role socialization than older children. Fathers were not very different from mothers in their socialization of sex differences, although there were some differences in the types of responses mothers and fathers gave to both boys and girls. In particular, parental socialization of sex typing

will be greatest at periods of transitions when the child is learning new ways of behaving, for once children have adopted traditional sex-typed behaviors, many mechanisms within society maintain this choice. Hongcharu (1990) concludes that sex-role stereotyping is significant in the sense that it can influence the way in which individuals interact in society and perceive themselves, and it can be harmful if the individuals who engage in it feel that they are superior and treat others in an unequal manner.

According to Wright (1991), parents and teachers sex stereotype boys and girls in school, especially science. Teachers give boys more attention than girls; teachers call on boys more often than girls; teachers ask boys higher-order questions and give them more time to answer. Girls are rarely asked to do demonstrations or help with experiments. Teachers are not the only ones at fault. Many schools unnecessarily schedule chemistry and physics at the same time as language arts classes, forcing girls (and boys) to choose between the two classes.

Textbooks are also to blame for sex stereotyping. Girls are often shown in passive roles, while boys are shown in active roles. Women are usually portrayed in traditionally female roles, such as nurses or secretaries, while men are depicted in what have been traditional male roles, such as doctors or lawyers (Wright, 1991). It's no secret that the male characters in children's books and television programs outnumber the females. One trip to the

children's book section of a library or one session watching children's television programs will show this discrepancy (Sheidon, 1990). Television in particular shows heavy gender biases. Most programs, even the daytime soaps, are dominated by men, Lemon's study (cited in Seifert and Hoffnung, 1991), as judged both by numbers of characters and by the importance assigned to them. In spite of recent efforts to broaden the portrayals of gender roles, the women who do appear on television are in strongly sex-typed roles. They are teachers, secretaries, or most commonly, housewives. Commercials aimed at boys and men tend to show more activity and to use rapid cuts and loud music. Those aimed at girls and women rely more on visual fades and dissolves and used gentle background music. (Welch, Huston-Stein, Wricht, and Plehal, 1979).

According to an article by Brodtkin (1991) dealing with the misconceptions of intellect and gender difference, sex bias on test items contributes to differences in girls' and boys' measured intellectual abilities. Also contributing to the difference are the children's expectations about how they will do in different subjects. Girls often don't expect to do well in math. Unfortunately that expectation is frequently shared by their parents and teachers. Boys get more of both positive and negative feedback; the positive feedback they get is almost always for academics. On the other hand, the positive feedback girls get is more often for being neat or quiet, or having good handwriting. When

boys get negative feedback, it is usually for their behavior, while the negative feedback girls get is usually for academics. In elementary and junior high classrooms, teachers are four to five times more likely to encourage boys than girls to advance in math. Despite that girls are getting better grades than boys, they are less likely to get encouragement (Brodkin, 1991).

We know that teachers' and parents' expectations have an enormous influence on children. They should have high expectations for all their students and children. Then both boys and girls can look forward to advanced academic achievement, feel free to select any career, and some day become equally nurturing parents (Brodkin, 1991). O'Reilly (1988) states that stereotypical views of men and women are constraining and harmful to both genders. To correct this, each person can treat others as individual human beings, and not only as members of a group. Respect for the individual will enrich everyone's life, and only when it is achieved can people begin to challenge and change sexism in society.

METHOD

This research was conducted as part of a human development class project at Arkansas Tech University in the summer and fall of 1991. Children were selected from schools, local child care centers, camps and their own neighborhoods. From that pool 213 children's responses were randomly chosen to analyze.

The researchers used two large index cards with a gender appropriate pictures and labels on each. The children were shown 20 small index cards with these words printed on them:

Fighting	Hammer	Book	Oven	Dancing
Washing machine	Street	Green	Yellow	Crying
Blue	Newspaper	Pencil	Swimming	Chair
Football	Apple	School	Doll	Truck

Researchers tested children from both preschool and elementary, and included male and female children. Researchers used a game approach in interviewing the children. During the children's classification of the words, researchers were careful to give non-judgemental and positive affirmations of choices. Responses were recorded on a special response sheet found in Appendix A.

RESULTS

The analysis of the data seem to indicate that the 20 words were basically divided evenly between girls and boys classifications. The words which were consistently classified as boy words were:

Fighting: 96% by preschool boys, 75% by preschool girls, 90% by elementary boys and 83% by elementary girls. Hammer: 96% by preschool boys, 95% by preschool girls, 92% by elementary boys and 94% by elementary girls. Blue: 80% preschool boys, 59% preschool girls, 78% elementary boys and 62% elementary girl. Truck: 90% preschool boys, 93% preschool girls, 94% elementary boys and 62%

elementary girls. Newspaper: 56% preschool boys, 64% preschool girls, 78% elementary boys and 55% elementary girls. Football: 90% preschool boys, 82% preschool girls, 100% elementary boys and 96% elementary girls. Two border-line boy words were: Street: 70 % preschool boys, 48% preschool girls, 63% elementary boys and 64% elementary girls. Green: 56% preschool boys, 61% preschool girls, 45% elementary boys and 66% elementary girls.

The words which were consistently classified as girl words were:

Doll: 86% preschool boys, 91% preschool girls, 100% elementary boys and 94% elementary girls. Washing Machine: 80% preschool boys, 80% preschool girls, 94% elementary boys and 94% elementary girls. Crying: 60% preschool boys, 75% preschool girls, 86% elementary boys and 60% elementary girls. Oven: 75% preschool boys, 82% preschool girls, 92% elementary boys and 87% elementary girls. Dancing: 69% preschool boys, 73% preschool girls, 84% elementary boys and 85% elementary girls. Two border-line girl words were: Yellow : 48% preschool boys, 66% preschool girls, 63% elementary boys and 70% elementary girls. Book: 56% preschool boys, 48% preschool girls, 57% elementary boys and 64% elementary girls.

Words which did not seem to fit in either category but were seen as equalitarian words were:

Swimming: preschool boy's answers 56% boy word, 36% girl word and 19% either; preschool girl's answers 36% boy word, 50% girl word and 14% either; elementary boy's answers 66% boy word, 12% girl word and 22% either; elementary girl's answers 26% boy word, 38% girl word and 36% either. Chair: preschool boy's answers 40% boy word, 35% girl word and 25% either; preschool girl's answers 36% boy word, 45% girl word and 18% either; elementary boy's answers 43% boy word, 39% girl word and 18% either; elementary girl's words 47% boy word, 36% girl word and 19% either. Pencil: preschool boy's answers 52% boy word, 33% girl word and 15% either; preschool girl's answers 38% boy word, 38% girl word and 23% either; elementary boy's answers 39% boy, 43% girl word and 18% either; elementary girl's answers 30% boy word, 43% girl word and 27% either. School: preschool boy's answers 42% boy word, 27% girl word, and 31% either; preschool girl's answers 20% boy word, 45% girl word and 34% either; elementary boy's answers 22% boy word, 54% girl word and 23% either; elementary girl's answers 15% boy word, 55% girl word, and 30% either. Apple: preschool boy's answers 48% boy word, 35% girl word and 17%

either; preschool girl's answers 34% boy word, 55% girl word and 11% either; elementary boy's answers 37% boy word, 45% girl word and 18% either; elementary girl's answers 18% boy word, 55% girl word and 26% either.

Girls both preschool and elementary seemed to be less stereotypical than their counterparts. On the boy classified words, girls rated up to 20% less stereotypical than boys. Elementary boys were found to be the most stereotypical. They rated the word "doll" as 100% a girl word and "football" as 100% a boy word. They statistically give the highest rating for each word be it a girl word response or a boy word response. Elementary school children tended to have more consistent answers than preschool children and overall boys tended to be more consistent with answers than did the girls in the study.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Children learn gender roles from parents, teachers, television, and peers. They infer certain messages regarding gender roles from language. Preschoolers based answer on personal experience related to themselves, reflective of their egocentricity. For example, washing machine was classified as a boy word by one child on the basis of his experience that the person who works on a broken washing machine is a repairman. Another girl responded that crying was a boy word because her baby brother cried. One youngster noted that truck was a word

that could be either a boy word or a girl word depending on certain circumstances. He believed that if "the truck shifts itself it is a girl word; if you have to shift it, then it is a boy word." Elementary children also included their friends' experiences and used a broader base on which to make decisions. They were influenced by peers much more than the preschoolers.

Although progress is being made in the area of stereotyping according to gender, the results of this survey indicate that there are still definite ideas of masculine and feminine roles and tasks. Even when personal family background information revealed a family engaged in non-traditional roles and activities, children's responses were often stereotyped. Teachers and parents must work together to modify and enhance children's development in this area.

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APPENDIX A

SEX TYPING RESPONSE SHEET

Record a B for classification of the word as a boys' word and a G for classification of the word as a girls' word. Record E for classifications as either boys' or girls' word. Put age of child in brackets.

* Words	Boys Girls				# of times this was classified as a boys' word.	# of times this was classified as a girls' word.	# of times this was classified as an either word
	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)			
1. Fighting							
2. Doll							
3. Street							
4. Washing machine							
5. Swimming							
6. Hammer							
7. Chair							
8. Green							
9. Crying							
10. Pencil							
11. Book							
12. Blue							
13. Oven							
14. Yellow							
15. Truck							
16. School							
17. Newspaper							
18. Apple							
19. Football							
20. Dancing							